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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest discusses the National Standards for Civics and Government for students from grades K-12. The Standards are organized around five central questions dealing with the following subjects: (1) the nature and necessity of government; (2) the foundations of American constitutionalism; (3) the functioning of American government and the place of democratic values and principles within it; (4) America's relations with the world; and (5) the roles of the citizen. Each of the five questions is followed by a statement that summarizes the standards that follow and presents reasons why citizens should be knowledgeable about them. The overarching questions are: (1) What are civic life, politics, and government? (2) What are the foundations of the American political system? (3) How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy? (4) What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs? and (5) What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy? This last question is the culmination of the document and focuses on the ideal outcome of civic education. A key section of the Standards emphasizes how citizens take part in civic life. Contains nine references. (DK)

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National Standards for Civics and Government

by Charles F. Bahmueller

It has been recognized since the founding of the American republic that education has a civic mission—to foster the development of informed, responsible, and humane citizens who participate in democratic governance and are committed to the values and principles of constitutional democracy as practiced in the United States. In this view, the well-being of a free society ultimately depends on the character of its citizens—on their moral and civic capacities and virtues, on their willingness to fulfill their roles competently as the ultimate arbiters of the purpose and direction of the body politic of which they are members. To help achieve these goals, voluntary National Standards for Civics and Government for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade have been developed by the Center for Civic Education. More than three thousand teachers, scholars, parents, elected officials, and representatives of business and industry contributed to the Standards' development.

The Standards are organized around five central questions dealing with the following subjects: (1) the nature and necessity of government, (2) the foundations of American constitutionalism, (3) the functioning of American government and the place of democratic values and principles within it, (4) America's relations with the world, and (5) the roles of the citizen. Each of the five questions is followed by a statement which summarizes the standards that follow and presents reasons why citizens should be knowledgeable about them.

The first of the five overarching questions: What are civic life, politics, and government? Students should know why politics and government are necessary and integral elements of any society. There are various views about why this is so. Aristotle believed that political society is the result of a natural process; others argue that government is necessary because without it people are unable to reach goals or deal with many common problems, such as the national defense or the regulation of domestic and international commerce.

This standard also asks students to think about the purposes of government. Some governments seek to protect certain individual rights; others pursue such purposes as achieving a religious vision or promoting a secular utopian ideology. Students should see that the purposes adopted for government affect the relationships between the individual and government, and between government and society as a whole. Thus, the purposes served by the government determine whether a society is or is not free.

The standards also emphasize the importance of constitutions and constitutionalism, beginning with the nature and purposes of constitutions. The Standards ask students to distinguish between limited or constitutional government and unlimited government, and between constitutions that are operational and that merely are facades for despotic regimes. Students should know what "the rule of law" means, and why it is a characteristic of limited government. They should also know that limited government protects, within legal boundaries, an autonomous, spontaneous, and self-organizing social sphere known as "civil society," and they should understand how civil society can maintain limited government. Further, students should understand the relationship of limited government to political and economic freedom. They should know what conditions are required for constitutional government to flourish. Finally, students should be aware of alternative ways other countries organize constitutional government.

The second of the Standards' five principal questions: What are the foundations of the American political system? Students are asked to consider the basic ideas of American constitutional democracy. The American idea of constitutionalism, for example, is that legitimate government is limited both in its purposes and the means employed to pursue these purposes. Students are asked to explore the intellectual and political background to these ideas from Magna Carta (1215) onward, including the development of popular sovereignty and the idea of constitutions as "higher law." Students should also understand how the Constitution has shaped the character of American society and what the distinctive characteristics of American society are. In addition, students are to understand the character of American political culture, the unique features of national identity and political life.

Students are to understand two strands of civic values central to the American founding and influential thereafter. They are classical liberalism, which emphasizes the protection of individual rights as a central purpose of government; and classical republicanism, which emphasizes the primacy of civic virtue and the common good. Students are also to understand that conflicts arise among these values. Private rights, for example, may conflict with prevailing conceptions of public good. They should realize that there are disparities, sometimes important ones, between American ideals and their realization.

The third central question: How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy? The Standards ask students to consider the ways and means the Constitution's framers devised to curb the potential abuse of power. The Constitution limits power by dispersing it. Federalism disperses power by creating several layers of government. Further, power is separated and shared through a complex system of checks and balances in which each branch of government shares some powers of the others so that none is unchecked.

Charles F. Bahmueller is a political philosopher at the Center for Civic Education. He was the general editor of *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education* and a co-developer of the *National Standards for Civics and Government*.

It is essential that students grasp the basic functions and organization of the institutions of government. They should know what the major responsibilities of the federal government are in domestic and foreign policy, and how state and local government are organized and discharge their responsibilities. Because state and local government provide most of the services citizens receive and are often most accessible, citizens should be knowledgeable about them.

Citizens should understand the function of law in a free society and its place in the American system. They should see how the federal structure of American government provides numerous opportunities to influence the making and executing of law. In viewing this complex process, they should understand what public opinion and the public agenda are, and how political communication via the mass media affect them. Finally, citizens should have some knowledge of political parties, campaigns, and elections in the political system; and they should know something about the many interest groups in American politics.

The fourth central question the Standards address: What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs? To meet these standards, citizens must first understand how the world is organized politically; that is, how it is divided into nation-states, and how these nation-states interact. They should also be able to identify the roles of major governmental and nongovernmental international organizations.

Secondly, citizens need an understanding of the history of American relations with the world. They should know how domestic politics and constitutional principles affect the nation's role in the world. They should know how American foreign policy is made, and the means and ends of foreign policy. For example, they should be able to explain the idea of the national interest, as well as the influence of constitutional values and principles on foreign policy. Finally, they should have a grasp of the reciprocal influence of the United States of America and other nations.

The fifth and final question addressed by the Standards: What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy? This is the culmination of the document and focuses upon the ideal outcome of civic education. Democratic citizens are *active*; "democracy is not a spectator sport." If they are to consent to their roles, citizens must know what citizenship is, what their personal, political, and economic rights are, and what responsibilities those rights entail. Among these responsibilities are voting in public elections and otherwise participating in civic life as a volunteer in community organizations, and as a constructive critic of public institutions, officials, and policies.

A key section of the Standards emphasizes how citizens take part in civic life. To understand the life of citizenship, they must be adept at civic arts and know the avenues available for participation. They need to understand the difference between social and political participation, and grasp such notions as the distinction between civil disobedience and revolution or rebellion. Above all, they must see how democracy depends upon attentive, knowledgeable, and competent citizens who care about their fellow citizens and their country.

The *National Standards for Civics and Government* is available from the Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302-1467. Call toll free, 800/350-4223 or FAX: 818/591-9330. You may order 1-9 copies for $12.00 per copy. Ten or more copies are $11.00 per copy. Add 10% for shipping and handling costs.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2842; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1440 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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